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INFO RHEHNSC/WHITE HOUSE NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000584

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/23/2026
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: SISTANI RELATIVE COMMENTS ON SAMARRA ATTACK

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT S. FORD, FOR REASONS 1.4 (B)
AND (D).

¶1. (S) Summary: Sayed Emad Kelanter (strictly protect), who is related by marriage to both Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani and Muqtada al-Sadr, told PolOff in a February 23 meeting that Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Said al-Hakim successfully pressured Grand Ayatollah Sistani into inserting tougher language into his February 22 fatwa. This language called on Muslims to protect themselves if the GOI proves incapable of providing them with protection. Ammar bin Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, son of SCIRI head Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, said in a February 22 speech in Najaf that the Sunni Arabs have condemned such attacks with words in the past, but words will not suffice this time. Ayatollah Hussein al-Sadr told Fourth Infantry Division senior officers in a February 22 conversation that terrorists are not being punished harshly enough. Our sense is that Sistani's fetwa on February 22 contained some movement in a way that opens the door a bit for Shia militias to operate - a serious change. End Summary.

Sistani Under Pressure?

¶2. (S) Sayed Emad Kelanter told PolOff in a February 23 meeting that Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani's February 22 fatwa, which calls on "believers" to defend religious places if the Iraqi Government cannot fulfill its responsibility to do so, was influenced by Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Said al-Hakim. Grand Ayatollah al-Hakim, Kelanter said, had put a great deal of pressure on Sistani, arguing that Sistani's strategy of telling Shia to remain calm after attacks had contributed to the attack on the Samarra mosque. Grand Ayatollah Sistani relented somewhat to Grand Ayatollah al-Hakim, calling for seven days of peaceful demonstrations to allow the Shia to vent their anger and calling on "believers" to defend holy sites if necessary.

¶3. (S) When PolOff argued that such a statement leaves the door open for Shia militias to take security into their own hands, Kelanter countered that Grand Ayatollah Sistani has always been opposed to militias and even helped Coalition Forces (CF) broker a deal with the Sadrism-backed Jaysh al-Mahdi in August 2004. The holy sites in Najaf, Kelanter said, are not currently guarded by any militias, but rather Shia "believers" who are private citizens. PolOff suggested to Kelanter that Sistani's statement could nonetheless be interpreted as an endorsement of militias, and perhaps further clarification would be beneficial. Kelanter said he would pass this message to Grand Ayatollah Sistani, and perhaps a clarification would be issued in a few days.

¶4. (S) Grand Ayatollah al-Hakim, Kelanter said, wants to use this opportunity to discredit the government of Prime Minister Ibrahim Jafari because Jafari is seen as being too

close to Muqtada al-Sadr. Kelanter said that if the Badr Organization can successfully protect Shia areas, it would certainly help discredit Jafari.

Ammar al-Hakim Demands Action

¶5. (U) Ammar bin Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, son of SCIRI head Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, in a February 22 speech in Najaf demanded that action be taken against terrorists. He said the Sunni Arabs have condemned such attacks with words in the past, but words will not suffice this time. In his speech Ammar al-Hakim said the attack on the Al-Askariya shrine "maligned the decency of the holy prophet's family." Hakim told the crowd to not attack Sunni mosques, but rather encouraged them to demonstrate peacefully. He said he did not want to see a civil war break out because of the Samarra attack.

Hussein al-Sadr Demands Harsh Punishments

¶6. (C) In a February 22 meeting with senior Fourth Infantry Division officers, Ayatollah Hussein al-Sadr said that leniently punishing terrorists only encourages more terror. He argued the Shia should take justice into their own hands, and pointed to the Ministry of Defense as a corrupt institution that cannot protect Shia. He blamed the attack on the Samarra shrine on Baathists and asked CF to send 400 more security force members to defend the Khadimiyah shrine in Baghdad.

Comment

BAGHDAD 00000584 002 OF 002

¶7. (S) Sistani's fetwa on February 22 twice urged the Shia faithful specifically to avoid acts of sectarian violence; he noticeably highlighted that the Shia should not help the group that blew up the Samarra mosque achieve its goal of spreading civil strife. The language in Sistani's fetwa on February 22 about the Shia faithful taking a more direct role in security was new, however, and mirrors language we sometimes hear from political leaders in SCIRI. The Kelanter account, therefore, is interesting. Kelanter's family relationship to Grand Ayatollah Sistani makes him one of our more credible sources on thinking at the senior levels of the Shia religious leadership. The idea that Grand Ayatollah al-Hakim influenced Sistani seems plausible. Certainly, news reports February 22 stated that Ayatollah al-Hakim himself was arguing for the Shia faithful to take a greater role in security of holy sites if the government can not provide the protection. The Kelanter account seems to show the extent to which acts of sectarian violence can strengthen the influence of hardliners in all of Iraq's communities. The harsh comments from the comparatively moderate Hussein al-Sadr seem to do so as well.

KHALILZAD